

Is American culture a sustainability problem?

Yes: American culture, however it is defined, is a sustainability problem.

No: The idea that wealth and success, as well as human ingenuity, are finite concepts is at least depressing and at most counterproductive as it discourages productivity and innovation.

Regardless of yes or no, the real core of this debate comes down to a question that isn't asked or answered, but rather ignored and therefore prevents the actual debate from taking place: *what is American culture?*

Before the debate can turn to the sustainability issues of American culture, one must define American culture.

Naomi Klein starts her TED talk by first noting she's Canadian and then by criticizing BP, which, as most people know, stands for British Petroleum and is a British oil and gas company. Although she doesn't hold back on attacking "our" culture she doesn't define whose culture she's talking about. So, for now, we're going to assume that although her points might be valid, she's not marking them specifically as the fault of *American* culture.

The second source is Ronald Reagan's Republican candidacy speech from 1979. In his speech, Reagan does address his opinion on and understanding of American culture. "To me," Reagan says, "our country is a living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is impossible, proud of its own success, generous – yes and naïve – sometimes wrong, never mean and always impatient to provide a better life for its people in a framework of a basic fairness and freedom." He also says that "If there is one thing we are sure of it is that history need not be relived; that nothing is impossible, and that man is capable of improving his circumstances beyond what we are told is fact." Reagan was proud of America, proud to be American and articulated this throughout his life. He felt that "There remains the greatness of our people, our capacity for dreaming up fantastic deeds and bringing them off to the surprise of an unbelieving world. When Washington's men were freezing at Valley Forge, Tom Paine told his fellow Americans: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." We still have that power." To Reagan, American culture is defined by our principles; principles that he defines as including "self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and above all, responsible liberty for every individual that we will become that shining city on a hill."

Suzanne Goldenberg picks up where Klein left off. She claims that Americans have fueled a global culture of excess. Additionally, she quotes an annual report from the Worldwatch Institute claiming that 'excess has been adopted as a symbol of success' starting in America, but now spreading to developing countries like Brazil, India and China.

Both Jeff Bussgang and The Economist highlight an aspect of American culture ignored entirely by Klein and Goldenberg: entrepreneurial spirit. Both articles discuss American culture from this perspective and this point is emphasized by the 1961 study by Edward Steele and Charles Redding that identifies a set of archetypical American values. Steele and Redding recognize puritan and pioneer morality, value of the

individual, achievement and success, change and progress, ethical equality, effort and optimism, and efficiency, practicality and pragmatism as core American values. Busgang, Steele, and Redding believe that American culture should be seen in a positive light and can be best summarized by American values.

And, lastly, to cover all the opinions on American culture covered by the articles on the Sustainability Problems webpage for this debate topic, there is Robert Reich. Robert Reich claims that one can sum up American culture in four categories of thought. He writes that there are four stories we as Americans keep telling ourselves, and that these stories epitomize the core of our culture. The first story is that of the “triumphant individual”, the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself, and eventually gains wealth, fame and honor. The second story is that of the “benevolent community”, neighbors and friends who roll up their sleeves and pitch in for the common good. The last two stories Reich claims are at the heart of American culture are depressing and invoke fear. “The mob at the gates” paints the United States as a beacon light of virtue in a world of darkness, uniquely blessed but continuously endangered by foreign menaces. The last of Reich’s stories is that of the “rot at the top” which concerns the supposed malevolence of powerful elites. According to Reich, Americans see themselves as self-made and charitable but also fearful of outside cultures and of the success of others.

Now that the views provided have been outlined, I will backtrack through them and do my best to iterate my own understanding of American culture and mark that as the starting point from which to confront this debate.

Firstly, Reich is fundamentally wrong in his assumption of how Americans (1) interpret his stories, and (2) in his belief that Americans even consider them. The first two of his four stories, I will agree, are profoundly American. There is a cultural belief in the ideas of being self-made as well as charitable. However, I wholeheartedly disagree with his interpretation of America’s understanding of Her role as a beacon to the world. Americans don’t see outside cultures as a threat to our own and we do not initiate conflicts with them. Rather, Americans see our global role as one of defending freedom, not of imposing our culture on others. “If we do not accept the responsibilities of leadership,” Reagan said, “who will? And if no one will, how will we survive?” This does not translate to hatred and fear, just a realistic understanding that not everyone shares our beliefs of charity and freedom. In the desire to protect our own freedoms and to help others achieve them, we cannot force others into our belief system, only defend our right to have a different one. This is not a position of attack nor is it the position of a barricaded society as described by Reich. America is a land of opportunity and freedom. We mean only to assure future generations the promise of such blessings.

Reich’s last story contradicts his second story completely. It argues that just because they are prosperous, successful people are no longer charitable. This is egregiously false. Success doesn’t cause someone to disregard his or her community, on the contrary, the American who embraces our charitable culture tends to also embrace the fact that he or she can now even more greatly contribute to the betterment of the community with his or her increased prowess and assets. For example, although frequently demonized for its success, Walmart topped the list of corporate donors in 2010 by over \$48 million dollars¹. In addition to this contradiction, this last story also falls back on the false idea that

success and wealth are finite; that if one person has them, another cannot because of it. It is the American belief that all people who aspire to be can be successful, not that the success of others is detrimental to anybody else. If one drops the idea that success is finite and embraces American ingenuity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, as brought up by Bussgang, The Economist, Steele, and Redding, one can relax and realize that these American traits will continue to lead to more success for more people, not limit it to merely increasing it for those who already have it.

Going back to Suzanne Goldenberg's accusatory outlook that Americans live a life of excess, I will first address her definition of excess. Goldenberg claims that excess is anything that surpasses current capabilities of replenishment. She argues that any resource acquisition that cannot 100% be replaced at this given time is excess. This is just foolish, since 100% efficiency is impossible in almost all circumstances and to eliminate the use of resources unless such efficiency can be achieved would result in the demise of the entire populous of the planet from what I can gauge, this is not a legitimate proposition. One of her supporting examples in the argument of excess is that "the world needs to erect 24 wind turbines an hour to produce enough energy to replace fossil fuel", but this totally disregards other forms of energy as well as the idea that new forms and greater efficiency will ever be achieved. Depressing much? (And also based on nothing factual, since our entire history points to continued innovation.) It is also arbitrary to distinguish some forms of resource usage as bad over others. Can one really argue that using the resources we must to eat is more 'okay' than utilizing other resources? As long as the options to improve efficiency and to replace resources still exist, how can one argue usage is in excess?

Reading through these articles one finds that she really must first address the abstract concepts of success, ingenuity and wealth; not so much from the perspective of what they are, but rather how much exists in our world. There are two views, the first being that there is a finite amount, and the second being that there is not, that they are infinite in their abundance. These polarizing views translate into opinions on sustainability and excess. Those who feel the concepts above are finite can easily defend how usage, at any rate, will eventually result in a sustainability problem. Those who believe in ever-continuing success, wealth and ingenuity see no correlation between usage and eventual over usage.

This argument in its entirety comes down to this core difference in belief: finite versus continuous ingenuity resulting in a corresponding amount of created success. I cannot ever see how one can argue for finite resources, when in order to do so, one must cap human imagination and inventiveness at its current level. Yes, at this moment in time, one can argue that the world needs 24 new wind turbines an hour, but only if one writes off other forms of energy production, increases in efficiency and future advances in other technologies that could reduce or eliminate our dependence on fossil fuel altogether. I see no value in this type of argument as it is fruitless to cut off humanity at our current state for argument's sake when thinking of such long-term issues. I believe, at its heart, American culture is that of ever-increasing ingenuity, opportunity, and freedom and that that combination of values can in no way directly result in sustainability problems.

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